

*W. Lovett*  
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# The Folk Lore of London . . .

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a Paper read before the London  
Society, on Nov. 14th, 1919, by

Mr. Edward Lovett

of the Folk Lore Society and Hon. Secretary Folk Lore  
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# THE FOLK LORE OF LONDON.

*The 29th Meeting of the Society was held at the Royal Society of Arts on Friday, November 14th, 1919, when a paper was read by Mr. Edward Lovett, of the Folk Lore Society, on the above subject.*

MR. ARTHUR RACKHAM, who presided over the meeting, in introducing the Lecturer, said he thought it was a very general habit to regard Folk Lore as a thing of the past—something which concerned the historians. But was it not true that we ourselves were making history? He thought it was also true—and Mr. Lovett told him he was quite aware of the fact—that Folk Lore was not dead. We had not thought of London as a country for Folk Lore, and yet London was a very large Country with peculiar boundaries; and it was also a Country concerned with Folk Lore. Ideas were constantly coming into London and as constantly going out of it. As a real Londoner—a Cockney—he was very keen to hear what Mr. Lovett had to tell us about the Folk Lore of London. He was quite sure that he did not regard it as a dry science.

MR. LOVETT said—I very greatly appreciate the honour that has been done me in being invited to address this Society on a subject in which I have very long been interested. A Londoner by birth, I have always taken a very keen interest in the “greatest city of the world.” It was nearly 25 years ago, in my researches in connection with Folk Lore, that I began to turn my attention to the place where I was born. For some time I was not able to devote much work to this, as I was at the time very busy in other directions, but seven or eight years since, being able to “retire,” I was in a position to take the matter up with better hopes of success. I need hardly say that the little I have done is a mere nothing compared with what could be done in say 40 or 50 years of hard work, for London is veritably the most wonderful city in the world.

It will be seen that I have confined my attention to the British population, and have practically ignored—at any rate in this paper—the large number of foreigners, of every nation and language, who are to be found in our Metropolis. One of the first things that struck me as being remarkable was that I found no superstitions in London which might be characterised as *peculiar* to this gigantic centre, and this caused me to investigate the position of the inhabitants. I then found what I really anticipated, that London is practically a great City of Migrants! The enquiries I made covered very fairly the whole district of London, from Hackney in the North to Croydon in the South, and from Barking in the East to Acton in the West. This area I roughly mapped out for future investigations. From the enquiries I made regarding the inhabitants in this area, I found somewhat to my astonishment that about eighty per cent. of the people I spoke to were born in London, but that their parents came from the country; ten per cent. more were born in London, as also were their parents, but that their grandparents came from the country; while the remaining ten per cent. were made up of those who were not even born in London, but had lived there since they were children, or of those who were utterly ignorant as to where they or their parents were born. I may here mention that the class of people amongst whom I have been working is what we popularly term the “Coster” class. They are not necessarily poor (far from it), but they are undoubtedly *the People*, in the strictly scientific sense of the word, and are fairly free from the conventional conditions which have unfortunately tended to take so much of the poetry out of our lives. I may also add that even

under the favourable conditions in which I have been able to work, there are very great difficulties in gathering Folk-Lore and superstitions from these people or, for the matter of that, from anyone. It is one of the prime rules that it is "very unlucky to talk about it." The old saying that "Talk of the devil and he is sure to appear," is believed in to the letter by all those who are superstitious ; and who is not ?

I have therefore had to approach the subject very carefully, and have met with a great deal of opposition and discouragement, being frequently met with the question, "Who 'er yer gittin at ?" On the other hand I have made a great many friends, especially among the old ladies of this class, with whom I have often chatted over most interesting Folk-Lore accompanied by a cup of tea. One of the first things that struck me, and I gathered the information from a lady doctor, was the wearing, chiefly by women and children, of blue glass beads round the neck as a preventive charm against bronchitis. I have found that such things—which, by the way, were made at Gablonz in Bohemia—were retailed in London at the extraordinary price of one half-penny per necklace. These beads are worn under the clothing so that they are not seen by the ordinary public. I set to work to investigate this subject, and, without going into unnecessary details, I may mention that in reference to the dividing up of London as given above, I visited, about one hundred and thirty different shops in these areas. One half of these were very small establishments, usually presided over by an aged woman ; and in these shops were sold very poor, cheap toys, and sweets of a similar character, in farthings worths and upwards, all pre-war prices of course. In every one of these shops I found that the bead necklets were sold to be worn by children as a cure for bronchitis, and moreover that they were worn continuously until the child reached maturity, and then often for the rest of life ; and that this practice was confined usually to females. It then occurred to me to ascertain what became of these beads at death, and I found, as I expected, that they were buried with the person who wore them. This, I think, accounts for its probable connection with the enormous antiquity of this curious practice and of the corresponding large number of specimens of beads to be found in Museums, and which have mostly come from graves in various localities. As regards the other sixty odd shops I visited : they were of exactly the same class but of a higher standard, and situated in better neighbourhoods. With almost surprising completeness, I found scarcely any knowledge of these beads existing in the higher class shops. This is significant !

Associated with this custom, I also ascertained that amongst this class of people it is an almost universal practice, when a child dies, to place in the coffin its favourite toy or doll, especially the toy it last played with. But I was surprised to find—and this information was conveyed to me without any enquiries on my part—that in at least four instances the pet bird belonging to the dead child had been killed and put in the coffin with the dead child. I also have a singular record of an old lady who was very fond of her cat, and at her death, her friends killed her cat and buried it on the day of the funeral in the garden of the house where the old woman had lived. Of course, it is well known that the riderless horse which appears at the funeral of an officer in the army is a survival of the time when his horse was killed at the time of a Chief's death. In Devonshire, quite recently, upon the death of an important gipsy, his horse was killed and his caravan and belongings burned. There is an old belief that the spirits of the slain animals will thus accompany the spirits of their owners to the other world.

On another occasion, when making enquiries in a herbalist's shop the man told me of a very interesting custom, which I had, however, already heard about in

other localities. He said that some time back two girls came into his shop and asked for some tormentil root (*Potentilla tormentilla*). On enquiring what they wanted it for, they declined to say. However, he gave it to them. A week later they came again, and wanted some more. He then said, "I cannot serve you unless you tell me what you want it for." The girl who had spoken to him then turned to her companion and asked, "Shall I tell him, Jess?" The other said, "Oh, yes, if you like." So she said to the herbalist; "This is my sister, and her young man has chucked her. We consulted a wise woman and she told us to get some tormentil root, and burn it at midnight on Friday and repeat:

"Tis not this root I wish to burn,  
But (William's) heart I wish to turn,  
May he no rest or profit see  
Till he comes back again to me."

The herbalist added, to me, that as they did not come again, he presumed William's love had been recaptured! As well as this root, I find that Dragon's Blood, which is a gum, from the tree (*Calamus draco*), Sumatra, is also largely used for the same purpose. It will surprise many to know that in my experience, especially in connection with this matter, I have had several applications from ladies of undoubted education and social position, and one letter was written under a coronet on the notepaper, asking me to send either one or the other of these love philters. I think this proves a fact, which seems to me very patent, that this question of superstition is not necessarily, as is often supposed, confined to those who were regarded as ignorant; but that it is altogether a matter of mentality.

One night, some time ago, I was in a London market place, and I saw on a barrow two calf's teeth in a little cardboard box. I asked the man in charge what they were sold for, and he said, "Oh, you wouldn't know, if I told you." However, after a little chat with him, he told me that they were sold to mothers to tie round the necks of their babies when they were cutting their teeth. I need hardly add that these specimens are now in my collection.

But what really did surprise me as regards fantastic ideas of cures I will now relate. After giving a lecture one evening, one of my audience asked me if I knew that Messrs. Allen and Hanbury were selling tiny glass bottles sealed and wrapped in leather, containing mercury, to be carried in the pocket as a cure for rheumatism. I expressed some doubt, but calling upon the firm later, I was not only assured that this was so, but they told me that recently the sales for these little "cures" had been greater than ever. We carried out a rough experiment with gold, for which mercury has a very strong affinity: but there was no possible proof that any contact could exist between the hermetically sealed mercury and anything outside the bottle. Upon investigation and enquiry I have been told by a large number of educated people that this carrying of mercury in such a manner is a "positive cure for rheumatism."

The carrying of a potato and the ordinary mutton knuckle-bone is too well-known to require explanation, but I have met with a curious illustration of the idea that "like cures like" on many occasions in London, where small grotesquely shaped flints, which bore a fancied resemblance to a swollen leg or foot, were carried in the pocket as an imagined cure for gout! Warts, of course, have come in for a lot of popular "cures," and in London I have found practically all that I have recorded elsewhere from the country, amongst others, the rubbing of a wart, or warts, with the pod of a broad bean is believed in. But the bean must be thrown away after the operation, where it will "never be found." Another cure is to

get a piece of Elderwood and cut a notch in it for every wart that is to be cured, touching the knife each time upon the respective warts. This stick also should be thrown away. Another idea which comes under the "doctrine of transfer" is to take a little stone for each wart to be cured and touch the warts with the stones, as before; screw the stones up in a bit of paper and leave them in the public way to be picked up by some one, to whom, it is thought, the warts will be transferred.

One of my East-end friends said to me one day: "I suppose you cannot cure my baby of whooping cough? He is very ill, and I fear the doctor thinks he cannot live." So I said: "Surely you know the old-fashioned remedy, don't you?" "No," she said, "but I will do it." I replied: "Well, I will tell you; but you had better not do it unless you first ask your husband, as it is not supposed to be right." As she seemed very anxious, I told her that this was what to do. She must cut a little piece of hair from the back of the baby's neck; put it between two pieces of bread and butter, then the next morning open the front door and give it to the first dog that she saw. If the dog swallowed the bread and butter and hair, then *it* got the cough, and the child would get better. That was the old legend!

I went away and the matter passed altogether out of my mind, but somewhat later in the year I met the woman again, and she said: "I've been wanting to see you to thank you for curing my baby." I remonstrated with her, and said it was absurd to talk like that; but she was very insistent. She told me she had done exactly as I directed, and that when she opened the front door there was actually a dog passing to which she gave the bread and butter and the hair. Before night, she said, the baby's cough was so much better that when the doctor called he said: "What have you been doing to this child?" She replied: "Nothing," as she did not like to say what had happened. The doctor said: "I cannot understand it. The child is rapidly getting better." In a day or two said the mother, the cough was quite gone; and as she spoke to me the child came running in looking as fit as ever.

But more is to follow: As I left her house a man came up and asked me to give him something just "for luck," as, he added, "I am very hard up." I answered, "I don't know you; and I don't know what you mean." He replied, "Oh, we all know you cured Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_'s baby!" "Nonsense," I said, "I did nothing of the sort! However, as you seem to believe in charms, I don't mind giving you a little one, and I hope it may bring you good luck." So, giving him a charm from my pocket (I always carry a few) I left him. Some days later, I met him again in one of the busy London markets, and he said, "I want to thank you very much for bringing me the best bit of luck I've had in my life." This is rather a curious coincidence, but it has happened to me on four or five different occasions.

One day I was in the neighbourhood of Camberwell, and saw some "Golliwogs" in the window of a small furniture shop. I went in and asked the old man in charge if they were very lucky. He said: "I don't believe in luck. What is to be will be, I have only got those things there for sale, to oblige a friend." At that time one of my collections of mascots was being exhibited in London, and there had been a notice of it in the press, so I said to this old gentleman: "Did you see that notice about the collection of mascots? Did you ever hear such nonsense in all your life?" His reply was: "Oh, that isn't nonsense at all." I said: "What! hanging an old horse shoe, wrapped in red cloth, over your bedhead to keep away nightmare, not nonsense?" His reply was: "No. I do that myself." "Perhaps you do." I replied, "But you never heard of anybody else doing it." He said:

"Yes, certainly ! Why, all the people round here do that—I mean all the people I know"—which was just the information I wanted to get, to prove that my suspicions were correct.

In my investigations I have found that practically everybody knows that the heart-shaped locket is one of the commonest forms of amulet or mascot. It is so, obviously, as the heart has always been recognised even in the earliest times as the vital organ, in fact, life itself ; and the wearing of the heart amulet is practically the wearing of that which will preserve life. Holed stones or stones with a *natural* perforation, are also, in London, largely carried or worn, and the reason of this is not so obvious. I am inclined to think, after some of my investigations, that in the first place the holed stone is to the untutored mind something abnormal and therefore of charm value. In some instances, it has been thought that the perforation of a pebble suggests the human eye, and that of course has always been considered as capable of warding off evil. I have found innumerable instances of glass eyes, not only human but those of animals, being thus carried as mascots.

The Mandrake, which is well known through its Biblical reference, is the root of *Mandragora officinalis* but the root of the Bryony is often used in this country as a substitute. The fancied resemblance between this root and the human form is somewhat striking, and with a little touching up by those who find them some roots have been made very realistic. I have one in my collection which I got in North London, which is a very fine example indeed. These are chiefly kept in the bedroom as a charm for general health. I have found, in some places, that it was considered good to facilitate child-birth ; but, unlike most charms, it is really dying out, owing, I think, to its being difficult to get, or being practically swamped by mascots which are more easily obtained. The subject is too large to fully discuss in this paper, but amongst my experiences I have on record that of an instance of a man who practically got his living in the woods, and who used to collect mandrakes, and he assured me that when he pulled one up it "screamed," a suggestive noise often made when pulling up deep roots from a stiff soil.

The subject of thunderbolts is too large to investigate here, but I have found in my researches, as I would expect, that the objects chiefly accorded as such in the London area are nodules of iron pyrites. I have also found that acorns, or models of acorns, the fruit of the oak, which is "the tree of the thunder god," are carried as a charm against lightning in the London area ; but this also is too wide a subject to discuss in this short paper. I was very much surprised once to find a fine old Devonshire superstition in London, although in all probability it was practised by a Devonshire man ; and it was this : He was a cowkeeper and one of his cows died mysteriously. He concluded it "had been overlooked" (i.e. bewitched). He took the heart of the cow, stuck it all over with pins and nails and hung it up in the chimney. I may mention that this was a common custom in Devonshire, and I have actually known it to exist within my own recollection.

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